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News Release

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State Board of Health releases new report, “Healthy to Learn: State Requirements for Child Health Examinations”

UW report finds 23 states require student health exams; Washington not among them

OLYMPIA – Nearly half of all states require that school children receive well-child health examinations, according to a new study, “Healthy to Learn: State Requirements for Child Health Examinations.” The University of Washington Human Services Policy Center (HSPC) conducted the study for the Washington State Board of Health.

Washington state does not require well-child checkups for new or continuing students, according to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

“Health experts and educators have long recognized that a child’s health helps determine his or her ability to learn,” said Terry Bergeson, state superintendent of public instruction. “Schools that invest in school nurses are better equipped to tackle health issues that may directly affect a child’s academic achievement. This report is an important first step in recognizing children’s health issues.”

The report is part of the Board’s continuing efforts to promote children’s health. On Nov. 8, 2000, the Board adopted “Recommended Children’s Preventive Services: Ages Birth to 10 Years,” a list of preventive services for children that are known to be effective.

“Our intent was to determine which services all children should receive in a well-child checkup,” said Board Member Vickie Ybarra, chair of the Children’s Health and Well-Being Subcommittee. “Our next step was to find ways to assure all children receive those services.”

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Ybarra said that requiring that children entering kindergarten have a well-child checkup is one of the ways the Board is considering to ensure that children get preventive health care. The Board commissioned “Healthy to Learn” to find out about requirements in other states.

The report’s authors, Human Services Policy Center Director Dr. Richard Brandon and consultant Gretchen Stahr-Breunig, identified 23 states that require checkups prior to or during entry into the K-12 school system. They were able to conduct further research into the requirements in 19 of those states.

“This study shows that almost half the states have recognized a need for health exams for young children,” Brandon said. “We know that Washington children have high rates of untreated dental problems and emotional and behavioral problems that can be treated effectively if identified early. Children need health exams from birth, but requiring exams for school entry—in the same way we require immunizations—may provide a critical backup to ensure our children's health, safety and readiness to learn.”

The study found that 13 states require a comprehensive health exam that includes specific components, including a physical and developmental assessment, behavioral assessment, health screening, and immunizations. An additional five states have less specific requirements for exams, and one state requires extensive health screening but no exam. Of the 18 states that require exams, 10 require them only at entry grades, and eight require them periodically. The majority of states only require exams for students enrolled in public schools; a minority requires exams for independent and home school students as well. Private physicians generally provide the exams and resulting services under the parents’ private or state-funded health insurance, with a small percentage of exams provided in school-based clinics. Schools are not normally expected to pay for either the well-child exams or resulting services.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction is currently coordinating a pilot study to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of requiring checkups for students entering kindergarten in selected schools around Washington state. Partners in this collaborative effort include the Board, the Department of Health, and the Department of Social and Health Services. Design of the study is in the very early stages.

Copies of the report and related materials are available by visiting the board’s Web site at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/sboh/> or HPSC’s Web site at www.hspc.org

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<p>The State Board of Health is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor to represent the people of the state. The board’s mission is to develop policies to promote, protect, maintain, and improve the health of Washingtonians. Visit the board’s Web site at www.doh.wa.gov/sboh.</p>
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